

Application of the Classic Light Infantry Model in Afghanistan

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to

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There is no worse enemy for a light infantry force than another, better light infantry force.

-FMFM 2A *Light Infantry* (Draft
9/2008)

Introduction

Marine Corps Vision and Strategy 2025 assesses the future security environment as one rife with complex challenges, characterized most likely by what it terms "hybrid conflicts".¹ Combining the lethality of modern state capabilities with the fervor, fanaticism, and unpredictability of irregular threats, future adversaries in these conflicts will seek to neutralize the conventional military might of U.S. forces by "selecting from the whole menu of tactics and technologies which best fit their own strategic culture and geography".² Coalition forces have seen early glimpses of this in the current fights in Iraq and Afghanistan. As Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) has unfolded, the Marine Corps has adapted to meet this evolving threat. The adaptation however, has seen infantry battalions grow heavier, more mounted, and increasingly reliant on higher and supporting agencies for fires (both kinetic and non-kinetic) and logistics.

An implication of these changes is underscored in recent after-action reports from Afghanistan. Emphasizing unique training and operating considerations compared to the fight in

¹ CMC, *Marine Corps Vision and Strategy 2025* (Wash DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2008), 21.

² Frank G. Hoffman, "Conflict in the 21st Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars" (paper, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Arlington, VA, 2007), 27-28.

Iraq, Army and Marine Corps units have noted consistently that many of these changes do not translate well to Afghanistan. Facing challenging terrain, both physical and human, and an elusive, adaptive, and complex enemy, the Marine Corps is unlikely to find long-term success with a "forward operating base mindset,"³ a force protection-first approach, patrolling in armored vehicles and relying on precision-guided munitions to win the day. The fluid complexities of the battlefield in Afghanistan call for an equally flexible, adaptive approach that matches the enemy's cunning and resourcefulness. Such an approach can be found in the training and employment concepts of classic light infantry units. Due to the nature of the physical and human terrain and the character of the enemy, the Marine Corps should incorporate the precepts of the classic light infantry model to train and employ infantry battalions deploying to Afghanistan.

Light Infantry vs. Line Infantry

The classic light infantry model has its roots in the Greeks' employment of lightly armored troops and fast, agile, non-linear formations to provide flank protection for the regular or line infantry in the phalanx. Similar tactics were employed by the Romans. Not until the 17th and 18th centuries however, did light infantry in the classical sense become a

³ BLT 1/6, *AAR and Lessons Learned from Operation Enduring Freedom Phase III*, pp23-24.

fixture among larger European armies. Advances in weapons and technology, specifically the breech-loading rifle and the machine gun, forced an evolution in the tactics of regular infantry to greater resemble the flexible, non-linear formations of light infantry. The distinction remained however, as true light infantry units found advantages in agility, operational versatility, logistical independence, and decentralized command and control.⁴ Units such as the French Chasseurs and Prussian Jagers were quite successful in multiple theaters throughout much of the 19th century by relying on versatile, non-linear tactics. The German Sturmtuppen in World War I and the British Chindits in World War II were equally successful. The agility and resourcefulness of these early examples paved the way for modern units like the Special Air and Special Boat Services and Israeli Defense Force parachutist units to continue in the tradition of true light infantry.⁵

The common theme captured across these historical examples speaks to the essence of classic light infantry: a cerebral resourcefulness and physical toughness manifested in an "unpredictable ambush mentality and a reluctance to follow any one specified method" creating "distinctive operational

⁴ FMFM 2A *Light Infantry (Draft)* (Virginia), p5, <http://www.d-n-i.net/dni/strategy-and-force-employment/fourth-generation-warfare-manuals/>.

⁵ Ibid.

versatility," adaptability, and self-reliance.⁶ These characteristics and others (see Table 1 below) form the foundation of what distinguishes classic light infantry from regular, or line, infantry. They also provide context to the supposition that the current model of Marine Corps infantry battalions is more akin to regular, or line, infantry than classic light infantry.

Light Infantry	Line Infantry
Exploit gaps by infiltration	Create, maintain, or enlarge gaps by combat power
Attack reinforcements or withdraws	Attack main defense
Employ only organic weapons to minimize logistical requirements	Rely on supporting arms to achieve fire power advantage
Stealth and individual / unit movement discipline facilitate maneuver	Fires and vehicles facilitate maneuver
Self-sustaining	MSR / LOC necessary to sustain force
Relative autonomy facilitates decentralized decision making	Complexity and task organization leads to centralized control
Self sufficiency and flexibility allow for rapid transition to defense	Logistic requirements slow transition to offense

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Table 1: Comparison of Light and Line Infantry

Logistical and Operational Independence

True light infantry forces are much more reliant on foot-mobility, and therefore much more capable when dismounted, than

⁶ Ibid, p6

⁷ Ibid, p19

current Marine infantry units. One need look no further than the number of motor vehicles in the current table of equipment (T/E) of an infantry battalion in Iraq to see how much more reliant on vehicle transport it is now compared to even a decade ago. Over-reliance on vehicles for tactical and operational mobility has a number of detrimental effects. Whereas true light infantry forces are largely logistically independent, the increasing reliance on vehicle assets (not to mention the myriad other pieces of equipment being added to current T/Es) has increased the weight of the force and intensified its logistical burden. This has created a less agile infantry unit dependent on a centralized combat service support structure for sustainment. The logistical burden has inhibited the flexibility and independence of infantry battalions, created an inward focus on protecting logistics (which further siphons away combat power), and ultimately limited their ability to find, fix, and finish the enemy. The lost of art of "living off the land"⁸, another distinction between classic light infantry forces and current Marine Corps infantry, only compounds this dependence on centralized combat service support.

Tactical Independence

Light infantry forces are not only logistically independent, they are also heavily reliant on their own organic

⁸ BLT 1/6, *AAR and Lessons Learned from Operation Enduring Freedom Phase III*, pp23-24

capabilities to defeat their adversary. They create and exploit gaps through infiltration, using maneuver and organic weapons to achieve advantage. This fosters versatility and enables light infantry forces to seize fleeting opportunities. This stands in stark contrast to courses of action often sought in the current operating environment. A safety-first, risk-averse approach coupled with the urge to seek technological solutions to human problems has created a situation in current operations that finds infantry battalions drifting toward a positional offensive mindset, heavily reliant upon external fire support capabilities to achieve a decision. This dependence extends to achieving non-kinetic effects, as human intelligence, civil-military, and information operations skill sets currently reside almost exclusively in small specialized communities and must be pooled from across the MAGTF to support infantry battalions.

Over-reliance on vehicle mobility, lack of logistical independence, and reliance on external agencies for kinetic and non-kinetic fires are just a few of the indicators that the current evolution of the infantry battalion bears far greater similarity to regular infantry than light infantry. While this evolution brought success in OIF I and its adaptation has seen intermittent success in subsequent phases of OIF, the terrain and enemy in Afghanistan will not be so accommodating.

Afghanistan is Unique

Countless differences exist between the operating environments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Among the most frequently referenced in after-action reports are the nature of the terrain (both natural and human) and the character of the enemy.

Physical Terrain

The impacts of the physical terrain throughout Afghanistan are well documented. Equally rough and austere conditions are found in the high and lowland desert areas of the south and west as in the mountainous regions in the north and east. Ground mobility in much of the country is limited to dismounted or pack animal movement either because of restrictive mountainous slopes or impassable, unimproved desert or river-valley flatlands. Severe compartmentalization due to alternating peaks and valleys restricts lines of communication and command and control systems and limits a ground commander's ability to concentrate maneuver forces. In short, the "terrain and weather are the central defining features [of a soldier's experience in Afghanistan]...directly influencing every other facet of combat operations".⁹

Human Terrain

The human terrain is equally difficult to navigate. While most of the population in Iraq is concentrated in or around

⁹ USMA Center for Company-level Leaders, *Afghan Commander AAR Book (OEF-7)* (New York: USMA), p8.

urban centers, 77% of the population in Afghanistan is dispersed throughout rural areas.¹⁰ Amidst the disparate populace, the tribal relationships are far more complex than that of Iraq and thirty years of conflict has further fragmented the traditional tribal structure, making the broad reconciliation found in the Iraqi Awakening Councils all but impossible.¹¹ Because of local splintering, the concept of pervasive national governance is anathema to modern Afghan tradition as tribal allegiance coalesces around district and local leadership.¹² The local customs and traditions of Pashtunwali add layers of complexity to the social and political fabric. Porous and ambiguous borders and commensurate geo-political squabbles, most notably with Pakistan, only compound the situation. Simply put, a Forward Operating Base (FOB)-centric force, one that does not pursue continuous operations among the people, one that relies on motorized patrols to demonstrate *presence*, has no hope of understanding the social and political dynamics on the ground and thus, no hope of success in shaping them.

Enemy

The character of the enemy in Afghanistan has been refined over thirty years of fighting in these austere and complex

¹⁰ Downey et al, “How Should the U.S. Execute a Surge in Afghanistan?”, *Small Wars Journal* (2008), p5, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/mag/docs-temp/136-downey-grubbs-malloy-wonson.pdf>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Dr. Amin Tarzi, “Afghanistan”, in *Beyond Settlement: Making Peace Last After Civil Conflict*, ed. Nicholas Baldwin and Vanessa E. Shields (New Jersey: Farleigh Dickenson University Press, 2008), 23

conditions. They know the ground intimately and have well-established lines of communication, safe havens, and stockpiles of materiel. Whether warlord or Taliban, most factions have additional support coming from outside of Afghanistan; in the south and east, that support includes safe haven found across the porous border with Pakistan. The enemy is seasoned, disciplined; he knows how to exploit the terrain, the weather, and the people to maximize his effectiveness. He is intelligent, determined, and tactically sound, proficient in coordinating actions of multiple small units, aggregating and disaggregating as necessary to maximize effect.¹³ He leverages both conventional and asymmetric tactics, often combining elements of fire and movement, crew-served weapons employment, and defense in depth with IEDs, home-made explosives, and suicide bombers in the same engagement.¹⁴ He is relentlessly adaptive. In other words, the enemy in Afghanistan, regardless of region or area of operations, has shown all of the characteristics of a hardened, experienced classic light infantry force.

Implications

Recent after-action reports indicate that the most effective operations in influencing both the enemy and the

¹³ BLT 1/6, *AAR and Lessons Learned From Operation Enduring Freedom Phase III*, p60

¹⁴ Ibid, p94.

population in southern and eastern Afghanistan should be characterized by a dismounted, foot-mobile fight at the company and platoon levels.¹⁵ Compartmentalized terrain, large areas of operation, a disparate populace, and limited lines of communication create an environment requiring above all else that small units (company-level and below) be increasingly self-reliant. This demands a certain degree of command and control independence; but more importantly, it calls for empowering small units through decentralized decision-making. By necessity, these conditions call for stripping resources from the battalion, regiment, and even the logistics combat element, to increase the tactical, operational, and logistical independence of companies and platoons. These resources might include some or all of the following capabilities: additional lightweight mortars, machineguns, and precision-fire weapons to increase firepower and lethality; and improved intelligence, information operations, civil affairs, and communications capabilities to improve kinetic and non-kinetic targeting and effects assessment, as well as command and control.

The implication of these conditions at the company level and below is that the preponderance of operations should be dismounted patrolling and movement to contact. When focused on

¹⁵ Downey et al, “How Should the U.S. Execute a Surge in Afghanistan?”, *Small Wars Journal* (2008), p8, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/mag/docs-temp/136-downey-grubbs-malloy-wonson.pdf>.

influencing the population, these actions should be overt, likely planned and executed around civil-military goals. While overt action against the enemy may be possible in some instances, i.e. BLT 1/6 in Garmisir, the enemy has, in other cases, presented himself a much harder target to find and fix. These conditions are much better suited to infiltration and ambush tactics at the squad and platoon level with only the occasional raid or limited objective attack.¹⁶

This tenuous environment creates fleeting opportunities for success, opportunities that may not allow for any time gap awaiting fires from supporting agencies. Platoons and squads must be able to seize these opportunities and must be capable of achieving decisive effects with organic assets. Likewise, the unpredictability of enemy contact (both its timing and intensity) requires the ability to quickly aggregate firepower and maneuver, not only for force protection but also to achieve decisive effects.¹⁷ All of these conditions require versatility and adaptability. All are prime indicators of an environment best suited for true light infantry forces.

Counter-argument

Some will argue the Marine Corps is already postured to do this, that the MAGTF, by definition, is designed to be adaptive

¹⁶ Col Chris Kolenda, USA, (lecture, Expeditionary Warfare School, Quantico, VA, December 16, 2008).

¹⁷ BLT 1/6, *AAR and Lessons Learned From Operation Enduring Freedom Phase III*, p60

and task organized, and that it can meet these challenges within the construct of the MAGTF and its existing maneuverist doctrine. This is not the point. The point is understanding how to make the infantry battalion itself most effective and efficient within the construct of the MAGTF. The bottom line is that the current Marine Corps infantry battalion is not trained, manned, equipped, or educated to operate in this fashion.

No one can argue the value and importance of the MAGTF. It is the hallmark capability set that distinguishes the Marine Corps from any other fighting force in the world. Within that construct however, it can be argued that the more independently capable the GCE is, the more effective and efficient the MAGTF as a whole becomes. The nature of the terrain and enemy in Afghanistan creates fleeting opportunities for success. It is paramount that companies, platoons, and even squads possess both the resources and the wherewithal to maximize the effect of their organic capabilities at the decisive point to seize such opportunities. Incorporating precepts of classic light infantry will better prepare small units to do this.

Granted, the Marine Corps is already adopting measures to increase the capabilities of small units. Concepts like Enhanced Company Operations (ECO) and Combat Hunter have found traction with decision-makers and are slowly being refined and implemented. Packages such as Train-the-Trainer (T3) and

Tactical Small Unit Leader's Course (TSULC) have improved pre-deployment training for small unit leaders, as has continued adaptation of Mojave Viper and the curriculum at the Advanced Infantry Training Battalions. No doubt more changes are on the horizon, especially with the Pre-deployment Training Program (PTP), as units begin to cycle through Afghanistan. But more can and should be done to accelerate institutionalizing capabilities like ECO and further sharpen the focus of pre-deployment training on building the skills and mindset of a light infantry force.

To be specific, the focal point of PTP should be developing the mental and physical toughness of the small unit. Through field evolutions and free-play exercises performed in austere and challenging conditions (emphasizing initiative and creativity) small unit leaders will be forced to exercise critical and integrative thinking, decision-making, and communication skills.¹⁸ This is the foundation on which all other training should be built. Beyond that, PTP should enhance and refine the unit's mastery in arms and fieldcraft, specifically focusing on combat conditioning, marksmanship, call-for-fire, first aid, and squad and platoon battle drills. It should also incorporate language and culture study specific

¹⁸ FMFM 2A *Light Infantry (Draft)* (Virginia), p8, <http://www.d-n-i.net/dni/strategy-and-force-employment/fourth-generation-warfare-manuals/>.

to the region to which the unit expects to deploy. As small units develop proficiency in these areas, they will become more adaptive, resourceful, and self-reliant. This is the beginning of the development of a true light infantry force.

Conclusion

The ultimate value in adopting precepts of the classic light infantry model is that it reinforces the maneuverist mindset and combined arms approach which the Marine Corps already espouses. In improving the resourcefulness and versatility of its infantry units, it will make the MAGTF more effective. Its precepts not only provide an appropriate solution to the challenges posed by the terrain and enemy in Afghanistan, but also "allow the USMC to put into practice most of the concepts that are already included in its fundamental doctrine..."¹⁹ and ultimately develop the type of agile force able to counter the challenges posed by a future of hybrid conflicts.

Word Count: 2522

¹⁹ Ibid, p17

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